

Bala—A Tribute in Retrospect

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This is an account of a five-hour photographic session with the celebrated Bharatanatyam dancer, Balasaraswati, one sultry May afternoon 28 years ago. Necessarily, what led to it must be mentioned, and also my own superficial acquaintance with the ancient and intricate dance-form, to explain my initial reluctance to take on the assignment.

In the summer of 1961 Balasaraswati was leaving for Japan on her first international tour to expound to the rest of the world the uniquely rich dance of south India, of which she was by then the unquestioned queen. A few months earlier I had taken a series of dynamic pictures of a vivacious young Bharatanatyam dancer I knew, in an experimental effort to capture rapid action without freezing it to immobility, with the aid of two electronic flashes bounced off the walls of the studio of a fellow photographer. Entirely by chance, Balasaraswati saw those photographs, and wanted the man who had taken them to take pictures of herself for her forthcoming trip. She called on me along with her mother, and her brother, T. Viswanathan, the flautist who was recently awarded the title of Sangita Kalanidhi by the Madras Music Academy.

I was in a quandary. I had, of course, seen Balasaraswati dance many times when both of us were much younger. She had never been a petite, beautifully rounded little woman like some of the noted Bharatanatyam dancers of those days, for instance Bhanumati: even in her teens she had been big-built and long-limbed—and now middle-age was upon her. That, in itself, is no handicap to a gifted Bharatanatyam dancer—in fact, the most enthralling exposition of the art I have witnessed was long, long ago, by a famous danseuse from Thanjavur whose name I now forget, but whose delicately communicative art is still fresh in my memory, who was 50 and grey-haired when I saw her.

But it is one thing seeing the live performance, with the reinforcements of the vocal and instrumental accompaniments, and the fluently continuous visual interpretation of the song by the dancer, whose footwork keeps faultlessly in time with the rhythmic stresses while her bodily flexions, sweep or still poise of hands and digital depictions (*karanas* and *mudras*)

convey the emotive content of the line being sung—quite another thing to have any idea of the evocative communication of the great art through what the cinema people term ‘stills’!

My pictures of that young dancer that had appealed to Balasaraswati were sustained, much more than by the subject’s art, by the fling and élan of impetuous movement, by her exuberant youth—a youth that had long left Balasaraswati, now twice that girl’s age. Apparently she had been slimming for her tour of Japan: the lines were etched deep at her throat and the skin sagged at the elbows. I was sure I would fail to get anything at all like what she wanted if I took on the assignment—and at the same time I could not possibly explain my predicament to her. I told her I was a wildlife specialist and had little experience of photographing dancers: no doubt there were many others who could do justice to her eminence in her field.

She was insistent. Finally I agreed to do what she wanted on explicit terms. I explained that my reluctance was because I feared I would fail incapably: therefore I stipulated that I should be paid nothing, not even actual costs: for her part, she should give me five or six hours of dance, for each picture needed a great many rehearsals of the movement for me to know the exact points of time and space when it should be taken. And although everyone knew she was the *abhinayarani* of Bharatanatyam (as a contemporary account of her had it), what I wanted her to dance were the rapid preliminary sequences of a Bharatanatyam performance, Alarippu, Jatiswaram and the like which offer much less scope for *abhinayam* (the expressive visual presentation of the song by gesture, poise and movement) than the *padams*, *javalis* and similar pieces that have an emotional setting: I asked for this as I thought my best chances lay in rapid movement ironing out the creases. I warned her that it was midsummer and that the sheer physical effort would be exhausting, though of course we could have breaks—a warning which, as I realized later, only betrayed my ignorance of her dedication to her art which was total, and superior to mere uncongenial ambience:

I used the identical photographic set-up used for my pictures of that young girl, a rangefinder camera with a wire framefinder, with the focus set precisely midway between two jasmine flowers kept two metres apart on the floor and a metre above that midway point (to ensure adequate depth of field at f/11) and two electronic flashes bounced off the walls: the only addition I made to the earlier set-up was to tape a Harrison diffusion disc in a deep hood over the lens, to soften acutance. The dancer had to be right between the flowers at the moment of exposure, executing the very movement to be photographed—an unavoidable requirement needing many tiring rehearsals. Viswanathan came with his sister and sang the



THE PERFECTIONIST The initial part of a Bharatanatyam performance features rapid dance steps and movements synchronized to the rhythmic set phrases sung by the Nattuvanar (the vocalist-conductor)—combinations of phonetic syllables that are purely rhythmic and have no meaning. The movement de-

picted here is for the phrase *thei-hath-thei-hee*: the two pictures are not enlargements to different sizes of the same negative, but were taken five minutes apart, as the slightly different positions of the feet will show. In their almost identical appearance they disclose Balasaraswati's deep concern for technical perfection.



DELIGHT AND ENDEARMENT Balasaraswati's interpretation of the words 'ullaasamu, sallaapamu'. Closely rendered, the words mean 'debonair delight and fond endearments', and are usually in a passage of recollected intimacy between lovers. These words are there in a few different dance-songs (varnam and javali).



While the literal meaning of the words remain unaltered in different songs, their interpretation by the dancer may be restrained and delicate or much more displayed according to their context. For instance, in the Bilahari javali of Tiruppanandal Pattabhiramayya 'Theli sevaga lella' the address is not in sweet recollection by a woman to her lover, but is actually a taunt—she tells him she knows all about his philanderings and this other woman, and says 'enough of this gay delight and endearments'—in this context, the more flagrant interpretation of the second picture is quite apposite.



ABHINAYAM for the words 'viribhanamu durusuga...' in the *Khamas varnam* 'Sami' nee rummanavey', meaning 'the floral arrows [of the love-god, *Manmatha*] come hurtling in apace'.



ABHINAYAM for the first two lines of a well known Tamil dance-song in Bhairavi addressed to the god Velavar—the lance-wielding Subramanya—to tell him of how a maiden waited nightlong expectantly for him, till daybreak.

pieces to which she danced—some she sang herself.

She wore a beautiful old-style sari of deep rose madder with broad coin-dots and narrow lines in gold lace. Her blouse was somewhat loose and rumpled at the arms, and for a moment I thought of suggesting that she should change it—and then realized I was trying for pictures of a noted exponent of a great traditional art, not of a well-tailored garment. The ornaments she wore were of conventional design and few—nothing like the glittering profusion of jewellery favoured by many Bharatanatyam dancers these days. She wore hardly any make-up—it was obvious she depended solely on her mastery of her art to get it across in the pictures and on nothing adventitious.

We made a start about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, and after I had exposed one roll of film (eight pictures), we had a break, as I felt the need for it after the sustained, ubiquitous concentration on diverse factors that such photography calls for. The angle of throw of the light off the walls had to be realigned for each picture, to suit the bodily position of the dancer at the moment of exposure, a tedious and repetitive process. By 5.30 I had exposed all the three 120 rolls I had brought with me, and was left only with some slow, time-barred 35-mm film.

I have cursed myself many times for my lack of professional prudence in not getting some fresh 35-mm film for the occasion—it was readily available then and not expensive. I thought I should have about four good pictures from the 24 frames of 120 film exposed—the technique employed was unlikely to yield any more. After the 120 film was used up, we had a long break. I dismantled the original set-up, asked Balasaraswati to sit and relax on a long bench (a chair would not have suited my purpose) and repositioning two floodlamps from my friend, the studio owner, set them up to illumine my subject the way I wanted, picked up my 35-mm reflex and took several pictures of her torso as, singing the songs herself, she rendered them visually by graceful and expressive manual *mudras*, interpreting each line in diverse ways.

There were snatches of slow-flowing *padams* and lilting *javalis* (see the footnote), and such was her versatile command of *abhinayam* that she kept varying her interpretations of them while still being faithful to their words. After watching two such varied renderings in rehearsal, I would be left undecided which I should photograph till she came up with a decisive third!

It was quite dark and past 7 o'clock by the time we broke up. I could not develop the exposed film till hours later, for in those days I followed a technique that required all processing solutions to be cooled to 20° C and therefore had to get 20 kg of ice first and wait for everything to cool down. On developing the first 120 roll, to my consternation I found there was

hardly anything visible on the film, only faint ghost images. I had faithfully followed the procedure adopted for my earlier successful dance pictures, but apparently dust and grime settling in the intervening months on the studio walls (which had been freshly whitewashed on the earlier occasion) had dulled their reflectance substantially. By prolonging immersion in a more vigorous developer I was able to get printable images from the next two 120 rolls, and had three pictures I thought good. It was past midnight then, and I felt tired. I am afraid I did not give the 35-mm film the care I should have in processing, but anyhow it was so stale that in patches there was no emulsion at all and there were dark mottles and streaks all over, though the images were sharp.

I gave Balasaraswati prints from the three good 120 negatives, and to my relief she was quite pleased with them. I destroyed all the 35-mm frames excepting a dozen, the ones that were least blotched, which I kept stored till March this year when I subjected them to a drastic double bleach-redevelopment process of my own contrivance, losing most but saving three frames. Prints from these, too, have been included in the illustrations to this feature.

I am indebted to Shrimati Nandini Ramani, a disciple of Balasaraswati for years, for help in identifying the thematic and song settings of these pictures. Naturally, they cannot convey Balasaraswati's mastery of Bharatanatyam anywhere near as impressively as seeing her actually dance would have done, but it is in the belief that they do get her art across to some extent that I write this tribute. □

PADAM AND JAVALI

Padams are erotic devotional songs evolved by the 17th-century wandering minstrel, Kshetragna, whose real name we do not know—he was called Kshetragna as he was constantly on pilgrimages from one *kshetra*, or shrine, to another, singing his amatory addresses to the gods. His *padams* are slow-paced, hauntingly melodious, and among the finest compositions of classical Carnatic music—to my ears, even more indicative of the true quiddity of the *ragam* in which each is set than the *kritis* of the later-day Trinity of Carnatic music, Tyagaraja, Shyama Sastri and Muthuswami Dikshitar. Kshetragna's songs are in Telugu, and deep-rooted in pure classical music traditions, but colloquial in their diction. Subsequently, *padams* have also been composed in Tamil, by others. The *javali* is of a far livelier tempo and of much later date, quite recent in fact. Among the masters of this scintillating form are Patnam Subramanya Iyer and his *shishya*, Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar, both of whom also composed a number of the much more intricately structured and basic *varnams*, now frequently sung at the commencement of a recital (*kutcheri*) of Carnatic music or a Bharatanatyam performance. Another noted *javali* composer was Dharmapuri Subbarayar who was a close friend of the celebrated Veena Dhanammal, the grandmother of Balasaraswati, for whom he specially composed some pieces.

The *padam* and the *javali*, which are features of Bharatanatyam performances, are both flagrantly erotic, and usually describe the love-pangs of a woman yearning for her divine lover. They are superb examples of the most evocative modes of classical Carnatic music and impressive in their virtuosity, but are couched in colloquial language and are even obscene in passages. Incidentally, there are a few compositions in these forms (as in the Tamil *padams* of Bikshandarkoil Subbaramier) which feature, not a woman parted from her divine lover, but a god yearning for the mortal woman he loves. I do not know if any of these were in Balasaraswati's repertoire: she sang none.

Aficionados of Bharatanatyam have sought to justify the almost illiterate diction and patent vulgarity in passages of these compositions by pointing out that they are not to be literally construed, but have a hidden symbolic meaning, that they signify in terms that can be readily comprehended by everyone (sexual love being one of the commonest and most importunate urges of human life) the yearning of the *bhakta* for oneness with god, in the *nayaki-nayaka-bhava*, a justification that may seem smacking of prudery to some, and anyway needless in the context of this ancient dance form, for Bharatanatyam offers little scope for improvisation. It is one of the most prescriptive of dance forms, and to this day its strict injunctions are closely followed, and the prescriptions pertaining to the bodily or manual depictive expressions of an emotional passage or situation are always refined, almost abstracted, and never crude or obscene.